**Senate Interior Appropriations Subcommittee**

**Potential Questions for Secretary Ryan Zinke**

***General framing suggestion:*** *Secretary Zinke has spent his first year in office selling out our nation's public lands and waters.  Every major policy decision or scandal out of his Interior Department has demonstrated that Zinke is driven by political favoritism and loyalty to the oil, gas and coal industries at the expense of science and input from local communities.*

**Wasting Taxpayer Resources:**

**Future Travel Accounting:** The recent Inspector General report on your travel found that you generally followed Department policy (despite finding that you could have avoided the $12,375 chartered flight after meeting the hockey team owned by one of your political donors).  However, this report only covers use of chartered and military aircraft between March and September 2017. Will you provide travel and security detail costs and ethics documentation on travel that falls outside of this narrow scope? For example, the cost of the security detail that accompanied you and your wife on your personal Mediterranean vacation?  How will you hold yourself accountable and transparent to the American taxpayer for future travel?

<https://www.doioig.gov/reports/investigative-report-secretary-zinke%E2%80%99s-use-chartered-and-military-aircraft-between-march-and>

**Personal Vacations**: It was recently reported that on a two-week anniversary trip with your wife to the Mediterranean, you used taxpayer funds for a security detail while you were in Europe. Can you please detail the cost of the use of the security detail on your personal vacation and the rationale for the detail? What portions of the trip did your security detail attend? Are there other vacations on which you have taken your security detail? Have you taken any personal vacations since the Europe trip and brought along your security detail?  Why or why not?

**Office Renovation Expenses:** Secretary Zinke, you have come under fire for your Department’s $139,000 contract to replace two sets of doors in your office and you have attempted to renegotiate the price due to public scrutiny. Yet this is not the first outrageous cost or request that you have made in the process of redecorating your office: $1,749 for a leather couch delivered from California; the installation of heavy, taxidermy elk and bison heads directly into the historic wood paneling in the Secretary’s office, despite Interior employees attempting alternative displays that would “preserve the historic woodwork”; and the shipping of a large stuffed grizzly bear to be on display. You have defended this budget before us as one that makes tough choices. In your words, “this is what a balanced budget looks like.” Yet it seems that your lavish redecorating tastes do not reflect the fiscal pain that you want to inflict on critical programs of your own department. How, in light of the budget you are here to defend, can you justify these expenses for your redecoration?

<https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/interior-department-ryan-zinke-flags-stuffed-animals_us_5a0369d7e4b0937b510f5554>   
  
**Budget Oversight/Congressional Intent**

**Operations During Government Shutdown:** Secretary Zinke, during the short-lived government shutdown, your agency made the call to keep the National Parks open without adequately ensuring patrons and resources were protected. You were also planning to keep the agency open had a shutdown lasted longer. This seems to have been done purely for political optics. Have you received any accounting for how much was spent by the Parks Service during the government shutdown? Where did this money come from, and where did you plan to get the funding to keep the agency open during the shutdown? Did it result in, or were you planning to use, any use of funds that had been specifically appropriated to other purposes?

**Congressional Intent in Appropriations:** The Omnibus appropriations bill put up sideboards around your proposed efforts to reorganize the agency. Do you plan to follow those directives? Given that the appropriations bill, and congress’s will differed from the President’s budget in sometimes significant ways, as with the Land and Water Conservation Fund or the proposed agency reorganization, do you foresee instances in which the agency plans to not abide by congressional directives or funding levels put forth in the omnibus appropriations bill? Will you state here and today that you will not ignore or intentionally go against those directives passed by congress?

**LWCF Language in Omnibus:** Mr. Secretary, I believe you know that I, like many of my colleagues on the Committee, am a strong supporter of the Land and Water Conservation Fund. I want to note my fundamental disagreement with your decision to eliminate these important priorities – projects that simply will not wait, and that are essential to effective management, resource conservation, and the visitor experience in our national parks and other public lands – from your FY2019 budget.  Last month, in report language accompanying the FY2018 omnibus appropriations bill, Congress specifically directed the Department continue to provide the Committee with prioritized lists of federal land acquisition projects for your bureaus. We expect you to honor the Committee’s explicit direction to provide these lists. Will you commit today that we will be receiving your agency-by-agency priority lists for FY2019, and can you tell us when we should expect to see them?

**Bypassing Congressional Oversight of Political Nominees:** Mr. Secretary, you have placed individuals within your Department in roles that are required to have consent of this body, without even going through the process of nomination and, in Ms. Comb’s case, in circumvention of the will of this body. Do you believe that the constitutional requirement of presidential nominees to have the “advice *and consent”* of the Senate should be overturned?

**Revolving Door/Politically Motivated Decisions:**

**Criteria for SES Moves :** I’d like to discuss the recent IG report that examined the mass reassignment of Senior Executives at the Interior Department. 11 out of 33 reassigned Senior Executive at the Department of Interior were Native Americans, a potential violation of both anti-discrimination laws and DOI’s Indian Preference rules. What criteria were used in moving these employees, many of whom had long-established ties to their homes and communities? Were race and/or political ideology factors in the decisions to move these staffers? What were the roles of Deputy Secretary David Bernhardt and Associate Deputy Secretary Jim Cason in ordering these moves? Would Bernhardt and Cason be willing to testify before Congress about the criteria they used?

<https://talkingpointsmemo.com/dc/sources-interior-officials-have-history-of-hostility-to-native-concerns>

**Florida/Offshore Drilling**: Secretary Zinke, you flew to Florida to meet with Republican Governor Rick Scott, who Trump has asked to run against Democratic Senator Bill Nelson, and announced that you had decided to take Florida out of consideration for offshore oil and gas leasing. Recent documents show that the trip was in the works for days.  When did you decide to take Florida off the table, so to speak? Was it before the 5-year plan was announced, knowing that you could hold an event with Gov. Scott? Or a day later, when your staff first starting planning the press conference? What involvement - if any - did the White House have? Do you believe it is appropriate to use taxpayer dollars to support your travel to promote a partisan election outcome?

**Hatch Act violation**:  In February, you traveled to Pennsylvania to make an announcement of grant funds to clean up abandoned mines. These grants are disbursed routinely every year. This year, 25 states and 3 tribes received grant funding.  Of all those states and tribal nations you could have visited to make the announcement, you chose to travel to eastern Pennsylvania. But Pennsylvania was not the state that received the most grant funds this year – that was Wyoming. And eastern Pennsylvania also wasn’t the closest grant-receiving location for you to get to from Washington DC to make this announcement - West Virginia and Maryland both received grants and are a shorter drive away.

But you still traveled out to eastern Pennsylvania… to a place that is one mile from Pennsylvania’s 18th congressional district… which is the same congressional district that held a special election a few weeks ago. The Republican candidate in that special election attended that event, and you [tweeted](https://twitter.com/SecretaryZinke/status/967500238473789440) a picture of you with him, holding a giant cardboard check. You then went on Fox News and talked about the importance of that special election.

Before you traveled to Pennsylvania, did you know that Pennsylvania’s 18th congressional district would be holding a special election 17 days later? Did you or anyone on your staff at Interior invite Republican congressional candidate Rick Saccone to the event? Did you or anyone on your staff at Interior invite Democratic congressional candidate Conor Lamb to the event?  Has Rick Saccone’s campaign reimbursed the Department of the Interior for any costs associated with your trip to Pennsylvania? You have successfully run for Congress before. In your experience as a candidate, if a cabinet secretary personally came to your district to announce federal grant dollars, to stand next to you holding a giant check, and to do a national TV interview about your race, would you say that increases or decreases your profile as a candidate?  Do you have any regrets that you traveled 500 miles on a Saturday, gave Mr. Saccone a nice boost, but that it wasn’t enough to gain the few hundred votes that would make the difference for his candidacy?

**Science:** Secretary Zinke, last month you asserted in front of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee--under oath, I might add--that you and your political leadership both “read every report” and have “not changed a comma” when it comes to scientific reports that are produced by your Department. How, then, do you explain the recent reports that a study on sea level rise and storm surge written by the National Park Service in conjunction with the University of Colorado, Boulder, has been edited to exclude any reference to humans’ role in climate change?

[https://www.revealnews.org/article/wipeout-human-role-in-climate-change-removed-from-science-report/https://www.revealnews.org/article/wipeout-human-role-in-climate-change-removed-from-science-report/](https://www.revealnews.org/article/wipeout-human-role-in-climate-change-removed-from-science-report/https:/www.revealnews.org/article/wipeout-human-role-in-climate-change-removed-from-science-report/)

**Drone contract:** Secretary Zinke, due to your press secretary’s statement that you were unaware of the $139,000 contract for the replacement of your office doors, I assume that you allow most minor contracts to be dealt with by career staff. Why then, last August 17th, did you email your Chief of Staff, Scott Hommel, to request to see a “drone contract” before it was awarded? Why did you care so much about that particular contract, and do you know any of the contractors or subcontractors involved in that particular drone contract?

**SEAL PAC Activities:** The Federal Elections Commission is opening a second inquiry into the operations of SEAL PAC, a political action committee that you started during your time in Congress, during the time in which Vincent DeVito was it’s treasurer. The first inquiry was regarding an accounting of an extra $200,000 that appeared overnight in the PAC’s account between December 31, 2016, and January 1, 2017. The second inquiry is about a much larger $600,000 discrepancy that stemmed from unreported donations, also under the oversight of Mr. DeVito. Either this is carelessness on behalf of Mr. DeVito or there is something more problematic at hand. Mr. DeVito is currently working for you in the Department of the Interior, correct? After these inquiries, why should we trust Mr. DeVito to properly handle any resources belonging to the American public?

**SEAL PAC Monetary Discrepancy:** Secretary Zinke--you and your wife own homes in both Montana and California. Do you pay mortgages on both those homes? You also rent a home on Capitol Hill, correct? Would you tell us how much you pay in rent, Mr. Secretary--unless of course like other cabinet level officials, you are receiving a sweetheart deal? Your salary as Secretary of the Interior is just over $210,000. Does your wife have an additional income? In the case of SEAL PAC’s $600,000 discrepancy, where did that money go?

**Cadiz:** The Cadiz water project--which proposes to pump groundwater out of the arid Mojave Desert for use in metropolitan areas in California--has seen an abrupt about-face from Interior in their favor when you and Deputy Secretary David Bernhardt, a former lobbyist for Cadiz, joined the Department. It has also been noted that a financial backer of the project, Apollo, is also a backer of Jared Kushner’s real estate business. Can you provide this committee written documentation of why Interior has reversed its 2015 decision and is allowing this project to move forward?

**Gentry Beach**: On your schedule, it shows that you met with a number of donors in Dallas, including Gentry Beach. Were any policy decisions discussed at this meeting? Were you asked to meet with or follow up Mr. Beach by a member of the Trump family?

<https://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2018/03/12/us/ap-us-trump-jr-donor-business.html>

**Lori Mashburn**: It was reported recently that Lori Mashburn, Interior’s liaison with the White House, has participated in private meetings with her former employer, The Heritage Foundation, in conflict with her ethics pledge and potentially standard ethics rules for federal employees. Your department has not responded to questions surrounding the circumstances of these meetings. Is it common for political appointees in your Department to meet with former employers or clients, in contravention of the current administration’s ethics pledge?

<https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/lori-mashburn-interior-department-ethics-rules_us_5aa13ffae4b002df2c617609?jj>

**Offshore:** Interior has proposed and begun circulated draft OMB rules to weaken the offshore rules promulgated after the Deepwater Horizon spill, which took 11 lives and cost billions of dollars in damage to the Gulf of Mexico. What is the process you or BSEE went through to outline these rule changes?

After the Deepwater Horizon spill, members of the offshore industry, Gulf residents and small business owners, and the conservation community were invited to provide comments and feedback both directly to then-Secretary Salazar and the offshore federal regulator. What meetings have you held with these groups to gain consensus around the need for your proposed rule changes?

**Izembek:** Your Department of the Interior has reversed course from previous administrations and will allow construction of a road through a designated wilderness area in the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska. Yet Interior has done no additional environmental studies on which to base this decision, stating in the press that environmental review will come later in the process. Without additional information on which to base this decision, what were the reasons for reversing course on this controversial road?

**Shutting the Public out of Public Lands**

**Ethics Paperwork:** When your department was recently FOIA’ed by Friends of the Earth regarding James Cason’s ethics paperwork--including any recusals, ethics waivers, and a list of clients Mr. Cason had while Executive Vice President and Principal of Energy and Alternative Energy for Kelly, Anderson and Associates--the solicitor’s office stated that they only had one signed document regarding ethics for Mr. Cason, which was the ethics pledge that the White House has all political appointees sign. Is it my understanding, then, that the political leadership in your Department have not submitted information on potential conflicts, recusals or ethics waivers received to the Solicitor’s office, which oversees ethics at Interior?

(Can provide FOIA’ed docs and solicitor response)

**Zinke Donors:** Shortly before your confirmation as Secretary of Interior, watchdog groups expressed concern over campaign contributions totaling $345,000 you accepted from oil and gas companies who drill on the public lands that you control as Secretary. Your top donor is Taylor Reid, President of Oasis Petroleum, a Texas-based oil and gas company that drills in the Bakken oil field. E&E reported that “In 2015-16, energy and natural resources political action committees contributed $126,000 to Zinke's campaign, according to OpenSecrets.org. That includes $3,000 from the Halliburton Company PAC, $5,000 from both the ExxonMobil PAC and Conoco Phillips, $2,500 from the Koch Industries Inc. PAC and $1,000 from the Peabody Energy PAC.” Are you recusing yourself from decisions that would affect the financial interests of your political donors? How many of these donors have met with DOI leadership? What are you doing to ensure that the interests of the American people, not well-heeled political action committees and corporations, come first?

<https://www.eenews.net/stories/1060048348>

**Bears Ears/NYT:** In your hearing with the House Interior-Environment Appropriations Subcommittee on April 11, Congresswoman Betty McCollum cited investigative reporting by *The New York Times* which found that access to oil, natural gas, and uranium played a central role in shrinking Bears Ears by nearly 85 percent. You rebuffed the Congresswoman, characterizing the *New York Times* as “questionable.” But their reporting was based on more than 25,000 pages of documents from your own Department, obtained with the assistance of the Media Freedom and Information Access Clinic at Yale University. The *New York Times* posted [208 pages of internal documents](https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/4391967-National-Monuments-a-Look-at-the-Debate-From.html#document/) to corroborate their article, including emails where staff are specifically asked to look into coal, oil, and gas resources on the monuments under review. Isn’t criticizing the *reporting* in this instance merely a way to distract from the issue at hand? What about these 208 pages would lead anyone to believe that access oil, gas, coal, and minerals were *not* central to your actions on Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante?

**Diversity Comments:**According to CNN, you recently stated "diversity isn't important," "I don't care about diversity," and "I don't really think that's important anymore." This followed a report that a disproportionate amount of career staffers you have reassigned have been minorities--nearly a third being Native American alone. How can you possibly reconcile this attitude with the [mission](https://www.doi.gov/whoweare/Mission-Statement) stated on your website that the Department of Interior “protects and manages the Nation's natural resources and cultural heritage; provides scientific and other information about those resources; and honors its trust responsibilities or special commitments to American Indians, Alaska Natives, and affiliated island communities”? Isn’t it clear that honoring America’s diverse cultural heritage is critical to fulfilling the mission of the Department you lead?

**Resource Advisory Councils**: As you know, the BLM’s Resource Advisory Councils are made up of expert members of the public that advise the BLM on how policy and land management decisions impact various local interests. They are, in my opinion, one of the best tools we have to successfully integrate public input into Interior’s decision-making. Many of these RACs, however, waited for their charter renewals until just recently and have had no ability to advise your Department for over a year of this administration. Additionally, you have directed the public to address the political goals of this administration rather than serving as voices of the community, as their creation was intended. Can you explain the reasoning behind directing public advisory boards to advance certain political goals? Does this mean you will only listen to members of the public that are in line with this administration’s policy agenda?

**Royalty Policy Committee**: Last fall, you filled the Department of Interior's Royalty Policy Committee with representatives from the energy industry and states with mining and drilling interests. The Committee recently recommended that the Department of Interior lower the royalty rate on new deepwater wells from 18.75 to 12.5 percent, the lowest possible rate permitted for federal leases. How will you balance the recommendation of this committee--many of whom work for corporations that stand to gain financially from their recommended rate--with your responsibility to provide a fair rate of return to the American taxpayer? How can you possibly defend lowering the rate on taxpayer-owned resources in such a low-demand market? If this recommendation is accepted, how will it impact receipts and, therefore, the budget of the Department?

**“Made in America” Outdoor Recreation Advisory Committee:** You recently appointed [15 representatives of the outdoor recreation industry](https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/secretary-zinke-selects-members-newly-created-made-america-outdoor-recreation-advisory) to the “Made In America Outdoor Recreation Advisory Committee.” According to documents obtained by *The Washington Post*, these new representatives include three people whom department officials flagged as potentially having a conflict of interest on the matter. Can you explain these conflicts of interest and pending lawsuits and what you are doing to address them? Can you speak the committee’s composition almost entirely of industry representatives--some with multi-billion dollar contracts--who stand to profit from your policy decisions? How will you ensure that the public’s interest and ownership of federal lands and waters are prioritized and protected when such a large percentage of your advisors are driven by corporate profits?

**“Losing” Public Comments:** Can you tell us what exactly happened to the missing thousands of sage grouse comments? *(answer)* So you’re saying that it is very possible that this is a systemic problem, that this could have or could be happening with other public comment periods? Why on earth would the agency continue making decisions on actions that depend on a trusted public comment period when you cannot tell us that the public comment process can be trusted in the agency.